

A Study on College Students' Achievement Attribution in English Learning

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Abstract. Students' attribution directly influence their degree of effort, which affect their progress in academic achievement. Based on Weiner's attribution theory, it researches on college students' characteristics of attribution by questionnaires. The findings indicate that vocational college students mainly attribute success to internal factors more than external factors. Generally, most students attribute their success and failure to internal factors such as learning strategy, effort and interest, luck. There are some differences of attribution ascribed between high achievers and low achievers, males and females. Therefore, re-attribution training is provided including guidance, goals setting so as to strengthen students' psychological conditions, thus improve academic achievement.

Keywords: Attribution theory; Achievement; Vocational college students; English learning.

1. Introduction

Most vocational college students are often confused with their academic achievement. Some of them always get high mark, but some usually fail in their English exam. Therefore, the questions are given: do the high achievers attribute their success to their high ability, hard working or good luck? And the low achievers ascribe their failure to their low ability, bad luck and task difficulty? When trying to answer these questions, they are in the process of making attribution that belongs to psychological behaviors.

Meanwhile, most Chinese teachers' pay much more attention to students' psychological behaviors in English learning. In class, the same students are given the same instruction, but some succeed in English learning while others are not. Why some students are successful but others are not? By seeking explanations for successes and failures, many researchers have been exploring and studying, and then attribution theory was first proposed by Heider in 1958[1].

Attribution theory is one of the most important factors that affect learners' future behaviors and achievements. Therefore, it is significant that we focus on study non-English major vocational college students' attribution for the purpose of providing efficient approaches to help students adjust their negative attribution, and improve their English academic achievement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Attribution Theory

Attribution theory was first defined by Weiner. He presumed that attribution theory was people's explanations for their outcomes of successes and failures which affected their future behaviors [2]. In the Longman Dictionary, Richards, J.C. et al., held that people attributed to perceived successes or failures in their lives which played a significant role in their subsequent level of motivation and behavior [3]. Therefore, it can be concluded that attribution is a perception used to explain learners' successes and failures in their studies, which influence their degree of effort in future study.

Based on Heider's theory and Rotter's locus of control, Weiner developed his three dimensional attribution and causal attribution, which have been extensively used. Weiner summarized six factors that why people ascribed their behavior to success or failure: ability, effort, task difficulty, luck, physical condition. Then he classified those causal attribution into three dimensions: locus of causality, stability, and controllability [4].

2.2 Studies on Attribution and Academic Achievement

Attribution theory has been applied in different fields, and then related studies on students' attribution have been conducted at home and abroad. Since 1960s, studies within the educational context have been done in the psychology field [5-6]. The result reported that success was more likely to be attributed to internal factors such as ability and effort, while failure was ascribed to external factors such as luck, task difficulty, and ability attribution was a strong predictor of achievement [7]. Meanwhile, other studies indicated that failure which was ascribed to internal, stable and uncontrollable factors such as low ability that influences future achievement, whereas failure which was attributed to internal, unstable and controllable factors such as lack of effort or poor learning strategy which had better implications for future achievement behaviors [8].

Meanwhile, attribution theory has been extensively used in China since 1980s, especially the studies between attribution and academic achievement. Wang Jingshu found that females usually attributed their success to luck, teaching method, effort, task difficulty and interest while the males ascribed their success to effort, learning strategy and teacher' teaching [9].

Li Changzhen conducted a research about an attribution analysis of the learning behaviors of non-English majors. The results indicated that the learners' causal attribution of success and failure was relatively stable. However, significant differences existed between the high-level group and the low-level group. As a result, teachers should take effective strategies to monitor the tendency of the students' attribution and improve their learning efficiency [10].

Xu Jinfen and Li Banban made a research on effects of EFL learner controllable factors on college students' autonomous English learning ability. It reported an investigation into the effects of five learner controllable factors on college students' autonomous English learning ability through a questionnaire survey. Results showed that nineteen variables were significantly correlated with students' autonomous learning ability, and that, among these variables, meta-cognition strategies, mastery goal orientation, compensation strategies, memory strategies and information-media motivation were positive predictors of students' autonomous learning ability, and luck-failure attribution a negative predictor [11].

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that most students attribute their success primarily to internal causes such as ability and effort, but there are different attribution on their failure. It is shown that there are some differences between males and females' attribution. Although a series of studies between attribution and academic achievement have been done, there are still few papers in vocational colleges. Thus it's necessary to make a search on vocational college students' attribution by taking the samples of Hainan College of software technology 2015 non-English major students.

3. Methodology and Findings

3.1 The Research questions

Based on literature review of attribution and status quo of the vocational college students, there are three questions are given: 1) what are the characteristics of college students' attribution? 2) What are the differences between high achievers and low achievers on attribution? 3) What are the differences between males and females on attribution?

3.2 The Subjects and Personal Information

Involving 120 non-English major students, the subjects consist of four majors: cartoon design, computer, hotel management and electronic business at Hainan College of software technology in China. Personal information include three parts: 1) basic information: age, major, class, and gender 2) score of final English exam of the last semester 3) self-evaluation of their English academic achievement 4) belief of being successful or unsuccessful English learners.

3.3 Information Instruments of survey

Lefcourt's Multidimensional Multi-attribution Causality Scale (MMCS) contains 48 Likert scale items: 24 for achievement and 24 for affiliation. Among them, the achievement scale, including 24 items (Cronbach alpha of 0.58-0.80): 12 for successes and 12 for failures, is used to collect

information about students' attribution belief on English academic success and failure [12]. Then, based on Weiner's three dimensional attribution and causal attributions, the distribution of attribution questionnaire items: learning strategy, ability, effort, interest, physical condition, task difficulty, teacher's teaching method, teacher's criterion of scoring, luck and learning environment.

3.4 Data Collection and Findings

120 pieces of questionnaires were handed out for four major students during the English class in March, 2016. 118 pieces of valid questionnaires were are collected. This study conducted questionnaire survey, and quantitative analyses with a statistics analysis system - Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 17.0).

In order to get a relatively full assessment of students' English achievement, five proficiency groups were classified as A (≥ 90), B (80-89), C (70-79), D (60-69), E (≤ 59) in the hundred mark system. The classification was made mainly based on students' own choice that which proficiency group they believed to suit them. Based on their self-evaluation of English academic achievement, they were divided into high achievers (above 85) and low achievers (below 60). After processing the data by the SPSS 17.0, the findings were concluded as follows:

Most of vocational college students attribute their success to internal factors respectively learning strategy, effort, interest, physical condition. Learning strategy, effort and interest are internal, unstable, controllable causes, which infer that they can make high achievements by making greater effort and appropriate learning skills. The finding is a bit not in accord with previous one which ability is the primary cause for students' success. Students generally attribute failure to effort, learning strategy, task difficulty, luck, learning environment and teacher's teaching method.

High achievers mainly ascribe their success to internal causes such as learning strategy, interest and effort, and their failure to effort, learning strategy and teacher's teaching method; low achievers attribute their failure to effort, ability, luck, task difficulty and teacher's teaching method. In a word, high achievers mainly attribute success and failure to internal causes, and low achievers ascribe their failure both to internal and external causes.

Both males and females generally attribute internal causes to their success and failure. Contrary to females, males are more likely to attribute their success ability, effort, learning environment. Females often took bad luck, task difficulty, learning environment external factors to explain their failure.

According to the results, it is necessary to give students re-attribution training for the purpose of transferring their negative attribution to positive attribution.

4. Implication

Re-attribution training is an attempt to teach an individual to change negative attribution to failure into positive attribution to success [13]. In other words, re-attribution training refers to aim to correct people's negative attribution tendency. There are two methods for re-attribution respectively teacher's guidance, goal setting.

The training of guidance can be completed by two aspects. On one hand, it instructs students to make internal attribution instead of external attribution; on the other hand, it trains students with some learning strategies. Related experiments have improved the importance of teacher's guidance influences students' attribution for success and failure. Generally, training can be conducted by group discussions. For example it takes four or five students as a group, and teachers guide them to discuss the causes they attribute to their success or failure. Then one of group members summarizes their attribution tendency. If they make external factors as attribution, teachers help them transfer negative attribution from uncontrollable factors such as luck to controllable ones like learning strategy, effort.

Research has indicated that students should make greater effort to achieve the goals which were challenging but realistic [14]. Teachers must help students set a realistic goal, especially for demotivated or low achievers. For example, they are required to complete the assignments within specific time rather than they must get high mark in the final exam. Difficult tasks which can be avoided often result in failures. If students can't achieve the goals, they will feel disappointed,

depressed and helpless. When students frequently experience failures, they may believe English is beyond their ability.

Therefore, learning guidance, realistic goals for students are important ways to train students' positive attribution.

5. Summary

This study reveals college students attribution tendency by the survey of questionnaires. The findings indicate students' negative attributions to success and failure influence their future academic achievements. Therefore, re-attribution training is provided to transfer negative attribution so as to improve learning effectiveness. All in all, the vocational college students' negative attributions can be changed to positive one by training. The author hopes that this study can provide instructions for college students and English teaching.

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